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OCI No. 2342/63

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
Office of Current Intelligence  
23 August 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Buddhist Issue in South Vietnam

1. Of South Vietnam's 14 million people only about 3 million are considered strict adherents to Buddhism. However, about 70 percent of the population identifies itself with that faith, if only loosely. Agitation by the Buddhists against the Diem government has been largely confined to urban centers where they were attracting increased popular support, particularly from students, before the government's crackdown. The Buddhist issue as yet has had only a slight impact in the rural areas where the bulk of the population resides.

2. There is no clear evidence that the Diem government was practicing a policy of repression against the Buddhists before the initial incident in Hué on 8 May. However, up to that time no close contact was maintained by Western observers with Buddhist spokesmen, and their assertions that they were mistreated by the government probably should not be dismissed out of hand. The Diem government nevertheless has practiced favoritism toward Catholics, who are regarded by Diem as more firmly anti-Communist than the Buddhists. Although Buddhists hold important government posts, many top officials are Catholic--a situation explained by the government on the grounds of their superior education.

3. A decree dating from the Bao Dai period imposes certain legal restrictions on Buddhist associations which do not apply to Catholic organizations. For example, the rights of Buddhist associations to acquire

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and dispose of property are limited. On 16 June, Diem agreed to amend this decree, but he insisted that this step required action by the National Assembly, which recessed without doing anything. It is also a fact that Catholics have displayed the Vatican flag in contravention of government regulations, whereas Buddhists were specifically ordered not to fly their own flag. The government maintains that violations by the Catholics first brought the whole matter to its attention.

4. The 8 May incident, which grew out of the flag issue, involved the use of government security forces to disperse a Buddhist demonstration in Hue. Eight people were killed. The government has refused to accept responsibility for the deaths, charging that Viet Cong agents in the crowd were guilty. From this point on, harsh measures have been used to break up other Buddhist demonstrations. These measures, which include arrests and detentions, in some cases may have been unauthorized acts of local officials.

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5. There is still no evidence that the Buddhist protest was the result of Communist inspiration or influence on the Buddhist hierarchy. The government recently told US officials it had no firm evidence to back its own charges. However, Viet Cong penetration at some levels of the clergy is considered probable.

6. During the dispute, however, at least some Buddhist leaders apparently reached the conclusion that their grievances would be removed only by a change in the government. A case can be made that the protests were partly political from the beginning. In the disturbance in Hue on 8 May, Tri Quang, the leading priest in the city, whipped up Buddhist crowds

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with charges of religious discrimination by the government even after local officials relaxed the ban against displaying the Buddhist flag. By 10 May, a list of five demands for fairer treatment from the government had been drafted in Huế, presumably at Quang's instigation. In recent weeks, it has become clear that Quang and other activists were playing a leading role in the direction of the Buddhist campaign.

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7. It cannot be clearly determined whether Quang initially acted for political reasons or merely seized an opportunity to focus attention on long-simmering religious grievances. He and some other younger leaders are militant and politically sophisticated. As the dispute has developed, they have clearly seen an opportunity to challenge the government politically.

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